

Thief, Bandit or Shepherd

John 10:1-10

Who here has ever herded sheep? Alright, even if you haven't herded sheep yourself, which of you understands the basic concept? As best I can tell sheep typically:

- Run from what frightens them.
- Band together in large numbers for safety and protection.
- Follow one in their fold who moves.
- Move toward other sheep or toward a friend whom they trust (Shepherd).

Now for those of you who didn't have a clue about any of this, if it makes you feel any better, you are not alone. I really knew nothing about any of this until the past couple of months when the concept of Shepherding began to intrigue me.

Now this initial intrigue of mine did not start because of some Bible story, or some far off heady metaphor about a Shepherd and his/her sheep. It actually began on a Sunday evening in our Youth Room. It was there that I discovered we have the daughter of a real-life Shepherd right here in our FBCJ family. Maybe you all already knew, but a couple of months ago I learned that Fiona Chicosky's Dad, Hamish ("Hay-Mish") was a Shepherd back in her native Scotland. I was talking with Fiona about growing up on farms when she said her farm life centered around her Dad being a Shepherd.

I hope I never forget that moment, because it was another example of how easily my world can expand if I simply pay attention. I want desperately to broaden my understanding of this vast world. I want desperately to broaden my understanding of everything that inhabits this world. I see it as the best possible way I can know more about God. You see, I hold tight to my belief that all of creation was created in God's image and while this includes the world which I live in, I am reminded daily that the world is so much bigger than the part I inhabit daily.

Now my initial reaction to her sharing this might have looked like shock, and maybe I was, but not in some negative kind of way. I was shocked because I had never met a Shepherd and to that point in my life I don't think I had ever met a child of a Shepherd. My initial shock quickly turned to excitement and intrigue because I recognized the possibility that my world could be expanded a little more... I was now being exposed to another aspect of life previously unknown and

even though I was profoundly intrigued, I thought it best not to pepper Fiona with too many questions in that moment.

So, fast forward to this past week and two (2) things stirred this pot even more. First, today's Gospel lesson begins with Jesus' Parable about a Shepherd and his/her sheep. Second, another child of a Shepherd became a part of our church community exactly one (1) week ago. Would you believe Daniel Godfrey, our new Director of Youth, Children and Families grew up on a farm where his Mother, Trecia ("Teresa") raised and Shepherded sheep? Even Daniel himself had a role because as some of you now know, he went around our State showing sheep at County Fairs.

The inter-connectedness of all of these seemingly independent things fascinates me. I believe this is the first Church I have ever been a part that can claim two (2) people so closely connected to the world of Shepherds and their sheep. While there are some who might say these things are not connected at all, they just happened by chance, I happen to think that these separate things coming together in this way indicates this might be something I need to spend time getting to know a little better. I have more to learn.

I knew Daniel grew up on a farm in Monroe, North Carolina, but this past Tuesday at my Lectionary Reading Group I found out that sheep and Shepherding were also part of his life. Now earlier this year I was invited to join this small group of Ministers every Tuesday to share thoughts and ideas about the scripture we will be using for our upcoming Sermon. This group has been wonderful for me in many ways and I thought Daniel might enjoy becoming part of this group.

So off we went to Sedgefield Presbyterian Church on Tuesday to discuss John 10:1-10. About half-way through our meeting my friend the Reverend Dr. Darryl Aaron, Senior Pastor of The Providence Baptist Church on Tuscaloosa Street in Greensboro and former Preaching Professor at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, looked at Daniel and in that powerful southern soulful voice said, "well young Reverend, you have been sitting there mighty quiet and I was just wondering what your thoughts were about these ideas of a Shepherd and his/her sheep?"

Now I don't know if Daniel was nervous about being called on, after all it did just kind of come out of the blue, but he sure didn't seem so because he quickly started sharing that his mother raised sheep and that he and his sister showed sheep at county fairs. He said that even though he and his sister showed the sheep at these

Fairs, his mother was clearly the Shepherd. Daniel went on to say that anytime his mother called the sheep, they followed her and even though the sheep were familiar with Daniel they didn't react the same way to him, or anyone else for that matter. Daniel's lived experience was unique to our group, and his ability to share this lived experience opened everyone's eyes to a deeper appreciation of the words found in this Gospel lesson.

Listen again:

² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Until Dr. Aaron prompted Daniel, and he responded by sharing part of his life's story, the four (4) ministers around the table had been talking about the words of John's story as though its purpose was only as a metaphor. Daniel's lived experience showed all of us that metaphor is not the only thing going on in this story. His lived experience grounded this parable about the Shepherd and sheep in today's reality.

When Daniel said, “oh this is exactly the way my mom's sheep responded to her... you know, she called them by name and they followed her lead” this Gospel story became more than just a teaching about an un-named Shepherd and his sheep.

This Gospel story become real.
It became a story about us too.

Did you know that even today, in the Middle East, a Shepherd will go into a crowded sheepfold and call out his own sheep one by one, naming them? The sheep will then recognize the Shepherd's voice and come.¹

¹ *NT For Everyone – John Ch. 10*

In fact, I just recently read a story about a Ph.D. student named Judith who spent several months each year in Israel as part of her studies. *One day while walking on a road near Bethlehem, she watched as three (3) Shepherds converged with their separate flocks of sheep. The three (3) men hailed each other and then stopped to talk. While they were conversing, their sheep intermingled, melting into one big flock.*

Wondering how the three (3) Shepherds would ever be able to identify their own sheep, Judith waited until the men were ready to say their goodbyes. She watched, fascinated, as each of the Shepherds called out to his sheep. At the sound of their Shepherd's voice, like magic, the sheep separated again into three flocks. Apparently, some things in Israel haven't changed for thousands of years.

Just like these sheep, what distinguishes us is not so much the "pen" we inhabit, but who we follow. Some come running as soon as their Shepherd calls, but some struggle and can be led astray whenever tempted by others.²

The Shepherd, though, is totally different than those would-be tempters masquerading as "shepherd's." After all, the Shepherd *spends most hours of most days in their company. The Shepherd knows their individual characters, markings, likes and dislikes, and they know their Shepherd. They know his/her voice. Someone else can come to the sheepfold and they won't go near them, even if they call the names. They are listening for the one voice that matters, the voice they trust.* This is exactly the way Daniel described his Mother and her sheep.

Now this story comes as the start of what we call Chapter 10 of John's Gospel, but when the book was written there weren't any divisions of the story into chapters and verses. By keeping this in mind we may discover that it might be important to find out what was happening right before. In this instance, a handful of questions dominated Chapter 9, like:

Is Jesus from God or not?

Is he a prophet or not?

Is he the Messiah or not?

You may be wondering what these questions have to do with this Parable about a Shepherd and his sheep and luckily what we find is that our Bible uses the Shepherd/sheep image to refer to a King and the people of the Kingdom. Even

² <http://ourrabbijesus.com/articles/discipleship-not-fences-but-following-shepherd/>

though in our modern world we may not think about a King and the people in this way, *in the Bible the ideal King is pictured as a Shepherd (Ezekiel 34). In a world that understood the necessity of intimate contact and trust between a Shepherd and sheep, the ideal Kingdom required the same between King and people. Anyone can call followers.* Even Thieves and Bandits call on people to follow, but their only reason for calling on people to further their own self-interests.

The thing is, the sign of the real King is seen in the response of those who hear and follow out of mutual love and respect. Each trusts the other and each is willing to lay down their life for the other. This is when a King becomes a Shepherd because a Shepherd's priority is never self-interest. Prioritizing self over others, protecting self over and above protecting others goes against the very nature of Shepherding.

Looking out for one's own interests is what Thieves and Bandits do. They tell lies and deceive the sheep. They steal for their own gain and leave their followers for dead. They manipulate those around them for the purpose of continued glorification of themselves.

Sheep instinctively understand when self-gratifying Thieves and Bandits are among them and they run. Their running away is justified, and so is their instinct to turn and run toward their Shepherd upon hearing his/her voice. They have come to trust and love their Shepherd and their Shepherd trusts and loves them.

So, as I stand here today I wonder if we are choosing to turn toward the Thief, the Bandit or the Shepherd. Are we even able to distinguish their voices? I certainly pray that we can because when we turn toward the Thief and Bandit we can so easily become them, but the Good News is that God is always calling us to turn and follow the Shepherd, and thus become Shepherds ourselves.

Maybe our lives are so far removed from Shepherds and sheep that it is hard for us to locate ourselves in this parable. If that is the case, then I believe we at FBCJ are very lucky because walking among us are two (2) children of Shepherds who just might be willing to share some of their lived experiences. And just like Fiona's sharing prompted me to learn more and just like Daniel's sharing last Tuesday open our eyes to deeper meaning, lived experiences like theirs make Gospel stories like these real. Their lived experiences help me realize the parable about the Shepherd and the sheep includes me and it includes you, and most importantly, it includes all of creation and that is Good News!

Amen!